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ABSTRACT

A cross section of 40 Australian single parents was administered an 8-page, 30-item questionnaire designed to generate information about the differences between males and females. The questionnaire contained a variety of question types, including close-ended questions, open-ended questions, and checklists. Specifically, items dealt with demographic data such as age, income, educational level, and number of children. Other areas covered were support systems, use of advice sources, and changes in parents' lives following divorce. The only significant differences found between mothers and fathers were on demographic variables such as income level, occupation, and visiting patterns of the children. Fathers' income, level of education, and occupational status were found to be significantly higher, and their general living conditions (in terms of housing) were considered to be better than those of single mothers. With regard to visiting patterns, children whose fathers held custody tended to see their noncustodial parent on a more regular basis than children whose mothers held custody. Possible explanations for these differences are discussed. (MP)

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A Comparison of Male and Female Single Parents in Australia

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ABSTRACT

A Comparison of Male and Female Single Parents in Australia

Kenneth K. Berry and Andrew Schmidt

The majority of the research on both male and female single parents has been done in North America and England. The findings of the few studies of male single parents indicate that they are doing as well, or perhaps slightly better than their female counter-parts. The one study which has been discrepant with this picture was performed in Australia on male single parent subjects. These findings suggested that the male single parent was performing rather poorly at the dual job of primary wage earner and parent. However, the study did not utilize a comparable group of female single parents so no comparisons could be made. In the present study a cross section of 40 male and female single parents were examined utilizing methodologies similar to that of the previous Australian study of male single parents. The only significant differences found between these two groups were on demographic variables such as income level, occupation, and visiting patterns of the children. These findings are comparable to those of other countries evaluating single parents utilizing the questionnaire approach. However, it would appear that male single parents in Australia do tend to experience more problems with their children and have reported more personal difficulties, but fare no more poorly than females. These findings are possibly a result

of the fact that a better cross section socioeconomically was used in the present study, whereas in most studies, particularly North American studies the majority of the fathers fell at higher socio-economic levels. The percentage breakdown and areas covered are presented along with presentation of possible hypotheses for the results.

Most of the literature on the single parent family deals with the female single parent; however, there recently have been a number of studies which have focused upon the male single parent. Virtually all of the studies with the exception of one have examined male single parents in North America and England, and only a few of these have attempted comparisons of male headed households with female headed households.

The bulk of the studies of male single parents have yielded highly similar findings. Most of the research indicates that fathers are doing at least as well as and perhaps somewhat better than their female counterparts in fulfilling the dual role of primary parent and wage earner (Berry, 1979; Berry, 1981a; Berry, 1981b). However, one study by Katz (1979) using an Australian sample, presented the gloomiest view of the male single parent. Unfortunately, comparative data on females was not collected. Katz basically used a questionnaire approach and studied only males. Berry, (1981b) in a recent review, criticized Katz's findings on the basis of the fact that he did not collect data from a similar female population and he sampled only from the organization Parents Without Partners.

The present study attempts to correct these methodological problems using a cross section of Australian male and female single parents. The questionnaire used was like that used by Katz (1979).

Method

Subjects A total of 40 subjects were examined. Twenty of the subjects were fathers who had sole custody of their children and 20

were female parents with custody. Ten in each group were from Parent's Without Partners (PWP) and 10 were not. All subjects at the time of the study were residing in the Brisbane region of Queensland, Australia and data were collected from four different areas. Attempts were made to obtain a cross section of the community and these ranged from the lowest socioeconomic levels through middle and higher socioeconomic residential areas. The non PWP subjects were obtained through contacting community organizations, newspaper advertisements and word of mouth.

Procedure All subjects completed an eight page, 30 item questionnaire. The questionnaire was based on that used in Katz's 1979 study. It contained a variety of question types, including closed ended questions, checklists, and open ended questions. The items dealt with demographic data such as age, income, educational level, and concentrated, as Katz did, upon items related to children. Other areas covered were support systems, use of advice sources and changes in the parent's personal lives following divorce. Before completing the questionnaires, informed consent was obtained and confidentiality was assured.

Results

Demographic Findings

The total sample consisted of 40 parents, half fathers and half mothers, with 10 in each group being drawn from PWP.

1. Age

The ages of the parents ranged from 25 to 50. The fathers were slightly older than the mothers with 65% of them ranging from 36 to 45 years old. The majority of the mother's ages ranged from 31 to 40 years.

2. Occupation

The largest single occupational grouping for men was that of tradesman (45%) followed by professional and technical workers (25%). Twenty percent of the fathers were receiving a pension. The majority of the females (65%) received a government pension. Among those females who did work, 15% did clerical work and 10% held professional positions. The males overall held higher level positions.

3. Income

The incomes for both men and women had a bimodal distribution with those people on welfare pensions receiving approximately $4 to 6,000A per year, while those who were employed had incomes between $8 and 18,000A per year. Fifty percent of the fathers received an annual income of between $10 and 18,000A, with a mean income of $12,375A. The employed mothers had incomes of between $8 and 15,000A, with the total mean income for all mothers being $6,842A. The rank sum test was significant at the .05 level for income.

4. Educational Level

Sixty percent of the males had 12 or more years of education, with the mean being 11.3 for all males. Among the female single parents, 35% had completed 12 years with the mean level of education being 10.4 years.

5. Marital Status

At the time of the study, 60% of the fathers were separated, 30% were divorced and 10% were widowed. Among the female sample, 40% were separated, 45% were divorced and 15% were widowed.

6. Housing

In general the fathers lived in what would be considered better housing circumstances. Eighty-five percent of the fathers lived in solid middle class housing with 70% owning or buying their own homes, 15% renting privately and 15% living in low cost government housing. Forty percent of the mothers lived in low cost government housing or were living with relatives. Thirty-five percent of the females were buying their own home and 25% had private rental housing.

7. Children

Fathers in the study had custody of 25 boys with a mean age of 10.5 years and 17 girls with a mean age of 12 years. Four of the father's children were of preschool age, 32

were school age and 6 were considered to be working or unemployed. Seventy-two percent of the children regularly visited their mothers. Thirty-two percent of the fathers stated that they did not want custody of their children, but felt that this had been forced upon them. Mothers had custody of 21 boys with the mean age of 9.2 years and 18 girls with the mean age of 12.8 years. Of these, 8 were preschool age, 22 school age and 9 were working or unemployed. The mothers reported that only 30% regularly visited their father. Twenty percent of the mothers stated that they did not want custody of their children.

Empirical Data

1. Difficulties with the children The most frequently reported difficulties by fathers was that of lack of help from the children with household duties (45%). This was followed at 20% each by lack of cooperation in family activities, disobedience, and problems with temper. The mothers also complained of lack of help with household duties (40%) and bad temper (40%). This was followed closely by disobedience at 35% and rudeness at 25%. The rank sum test comparing reports of a number of difficulties was not significant. The Chi square which was performed to determine if men and women differed in the type of difficulties, also was not

statistically significant. A rank sum test was done in order to determine if there was a difference in the number and type of problems between fathers who actively wanted custody and those who did not want custody. There was no significant difference in the number of difficulties reported nor was there a significant difference in the type of difficulties reported.

2. Support Systems The number of support systems utilized by single parents was examined in terms of male versus female and males who wanted custody versus males who did not want custody. Rank sum tests found no difference between the number of support systems used by mothers and those used by fathers. The Chi square, which was used to examine differences in the type of support system on which the parents relied, also was not significant. In addition, significant differences were not found on either the rank sum test performed on the differences between fathers who actively sought custody and those who had it thrust upon them or the Chi square test performed on differences between the types of support systems with those parents who desired custody and those who did not.
3. Type of help desired The primary concerns of fathers were help with household duties (50%), financial help (45%),

and assistance with personal (35%). The primary concerns of mothers were financial help (60%), help with personal problems (45%), and help in performing household tasks (30%). Significant differences were not found between fathers and mothers in the types of help needed.

Fifty percent of the fathers complained that the job was too big for one person as compared with 65% of the mothers who felt similarly. This difference between mothers and fathers, as well as the difference between PWP and non-PWP parents on this complaint, was not significant.

4. Cause for separation Forty-five percent of the fathers and 36% of the mothers gave "growing apart" as a cause for separation or divorce, and 26% of the mothers gave "abuse" as the cause. However, none of these differences were significant between mothers and fathers. It was interesting to note that 80% of the women giving abuse as the cause for divorce were from PWP, even though this difference also was not significant.
5. Personal life After the separation or divorce, the majority of respondents reported a period of time in which they did not feel comfortable in dating. The mean length of time reported was 6 months for men and 8.8 months for women.

After this time, 88% of both the males and female respondents reported making new heterosexual friends.

Changes in the parent's leisure activities were explored in the following four areas:

1. Going out with old friends
2. Viewing and participating in sports
3. Political activity
4. Studying

The only marked changed which occurred following separation and divorce was in the category of "going out with old friends". Both 50% of the fathers and mothers reported that there had been a decrease in this activity. However, in the other areas, the large majority of the respondents stated that there had been no change.

In addition to changes in leisure time activities, respondents also reported changes in working hours. Fifty-three percent of the fathers reported that their working hours have changed since becoming a single parent. Some fathers reported giving up their careers, others reported taking less skilled jobs with less responsibility, and a few simply stated lack of interest and concentration in their jobs. However, 78% of the fathers reported seeing their children the same amount of time or more than previously, while 22% reported spending less time with their

children. Thirty-five percent of the mothers reported a change in working hours and 26% reported seeing less of their children.

Both 90% of the males and females responded that a professional counseling service for recently separated single parents would be beneficial.

Discussion

In spite of the smaller sample size, the fathers in the present study generally are very much like those studied by Katz (1979). In regard to demographic variables, the age range of Katz's sample was somewhat broader and his sample's average income level was lower. Likewise, his average educational level for fathers was lower. The major differences occurring were in the social and leisure activities reported by the fathers. In the present sample, there was little change in leisure time activities except in the case of contact with friends. The fathers in this study reported decreased contact with friends but little change in other activities; whereas Katz found that there were marked changes in all activities. In general, it appears that the present sample is comparable to that of Katz.

One would conclude that Australian fathers do not fare as well as their North American counterparts. They report more difficulties in dealing with their children; a greater number of them have custody when it is not desired; and it appears that they generally may be

less happy than North American single parent fathers. It would appear that Katz's findings are accurate. However, his apparent conclusion that the male single parent is doing more poorly than the female single parent in Australia is not supported by the present data.

Australian male single parents are having difficulties, but it appears that these are equaled by Australian female single parents. From the present data, we can not say that Australian mothers are doing a better job at solo parenting than are fathers; nor can we state that male single parents in Australia are performing better than their female counterparts. These conclusions are very similar to the conclusions reported by Defrain and Eirick (1981) on a North American comparison of single fathers and mothers. Defrain and Eirick essentially found no differences between mothers and fathers in their questionnaire study.

In this study, there were differences between mothers and fathers, particularly in the demographic data. As with North American single parent fathers, these fathers generally fall at a higher socioeconomic level than female single parents. The father's income level of education, and occupational status are significantly higher, and their general living conditions, in terms of housing, would be considered to be better. In regard to other variables, there was a difference in the extent to which their children saw the noncustodial parent. Father custody children tended to see their

noncustodial parent on a more regular basis than mother custody children. The reasons for this difference are difficult to explain. On the surface, it would appear that fathers may be somewhat more cooperative in encouraging contact with the noncustodial spouse; or it simply may be a reflection of a greater degree of involvement on the part of mothers compared to noncustodial fathers.

The reasons for the apparent differences between Australian single parents and North American single parents, especially in the case of fathers, is even more difficult to interpret. It may well be that because of the biases of the courts in North America (Berry, 1981b), North American fathers are a rather unique sample and not representative of fathers at large. Because of the courts' biases in favor of mothers when awarding custody, fathers who are awarded custody following court battles must present themselves as better than average parents. As courts increase in willingness to award fathers sole custody it seems highly probable that the performance of North American fathers in the role of solo parenting will show decreases and become much more like Australian single parents.

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